



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN HAMILTON

Tony Meyers, Chef, Serratto

Got Game?

Oregon Chefs Embrace The Beast

WHEN SOME OF US THINK OF EATING GAME, WE PROBABLY VISUALIZE ANIMALS THAT HAVE BEEN TAKEN BY HUNTERS, then skinned or plucked, cleaned, and consumed at home. These kinds of meats are often ground or prepared in stews to mask their toughness and "gaminess." Sometimes we have to be careful to avoid biting into buckshot when trying game birds or the like. Maybe we cringe at a vision of little Bambi being slaughtered by a man in camouflage in some remote wilderness.

But once again, welcome to Oregon's restaurant industry, where they tend to do things a little differently. Game and other non-traditional meats are finding their way into a wide variety of eating places around the state. And some establishments, under the influence of classical culinary training, have been featuring them for years. Tasty entrees and appetizers include rabbit, venison, wild boar, elk, goose, game birds and more. Many of these animals are raised on

Main Ingredient

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farms for the express purpose of consumption.

Geoff Latham is the founder and president of Nicky USA, the premier supplier of such delicacies in the Northwest, and works with restaurants from California to as far east as Chicago. With the new moniker Nicky Farms, Latham has almost single-handedly pioneered the art of supplying exotic protein to Northwest restaurants. He started out delivering rabbits to grocery stores and restaurant clients while also waiting tables during college in Corvallis — Geoff is a hardcore Beaver Believer — working for a company that later folded. Latham set out on his own and was eventually persuaded by chef-customers to branch out in order to survive. Though the Nicky Rabbit still prevails, today the company sells hundreds of specialty meats. Latham has few if any noticeable rivals.

Latham's mission is to bring the land to the consumer, harkening back to a long-ago culinary culture that depended on game for a family's protein. Nicky USA supplies elk, venison, bison, duck, goose, quail, squab, partridge, wild boar and much more to some of Oregon's finest and trendiest eating establishments. Latham's company, which is subject to daily FDA inspection, is "devoted to helping the epicurean come closer to the farm while still getting the highest quality, consistency and food safety our clients expect." Kudos for Nicky Farms pour in from among Oregon's elite rank of chefs: Vitaly Paley of Paley's Place; Philippe Boulton of Portland's Heathman Hotel and the Multnomah Athletic Club; and Jonathan Sunderman of Seattle's Lark, to name but a few, all sing his praises.

Latham points out that, as in other parts of the world, Northwest restaurants' protein offerings are seasonal: Fresh seafood in the summer; lighter game in the autumn as well as specialty meats during hunting season, and red meats as well as rabbit in the winter. As he puts it, "When the fish goes down, the boar goes up." Matthew Bennett, chef-owner of the acclaimed Sybaris in Albany, Oregon, says game dishes "are important to making us a unique dining experience. In the summer we lean more toward birds — quail, partridge, guinea hen and pheasant. In the winter, we go more for furred game — elk, venison, boar." In Eugene, Sweetwater's Executive Chef Michael Theime observes, "As the light fades, people tend to go with the darker, red meats," game or not.

Wild boar has become something of a staple at Northwest Portland's busy Serratto Restaurant, where it was lately featured in the pizza del giorno (pizza of the day). Regularly available is their tagliatelle, a pasta prepared in a rich sauce with wild boar, red wine, tomatoes and herbs, with an orange gremolata. Chris Carricker, the chef at Portland's Gilt Club, reports that his charcuterie offering, wild boar nuggets with pickled cranberries, whole grain mustard and bitter orange marmalade is his customers' favorite exotic dish. (It's followed in popularity by elk tartar with duck-fat fries.) Sybaris' 2009 New Year's Eve seven-course prix fixe menu includes a grilled wild boar chop with spiced peach jus, soft cheddar-sage grits and lacquered boar bacon.

Nicky USA works with ranches and farms around the region to produce unique, custom items like elk sausages made with Pinot Noir and local huckleberries, and a new hazelnut-finished hog. Most of his customers are located within 600 miles of the company headquarters in Portland, and most of his sources are in Oregon,

keeping his carbon footprint relatively low. That fits nicely with recent trends toward local sourcing, sustainability and the American public's newfound adventurousness — as a result of watching the Food Network and a never-ending procession of celebrity chef shows — when it comes to food. Meanwhile, Latham reminds us that only a few generations have gone by since Americans relied on game for much of their protein. Since then our eating habits have in some ways become sanitized and standardized. But that's changing. He says that in the markets he supplies, epicures who "want to know the whole story" of the food they order, even in today's economy, are perhaps "more willing to spend a little more of their income to maintain" that interest.

But today even non-foodies are interested in lesser-priced offerings such as oxtail short ribs, shoulder meats and lamb osso bucco. And that goes along with current economic constraints. Game tends to be expensive, but in the rediscovered tradition of chefs using the whole animal, "from snout to tail" — promoted in British chef Fergus Henderson's book, *The Whole Beast: Nose to Tail Eating*, and exemplified by Anthony Bourdain's 2006 book, *The Nasty Bits* — chefs are offering, and customers are buying, less expensive "off-cuts" and offal (trimmings). While "primal cuts" like steak are expensive, when it comes to elk or bison, for instance, organ meat and legs can help make up the cost difference. It also carries a risk, of course. Carricker notes that a downside is "getting over some people's fear of certain parts of the game animal, like serving venison heart tartar... or serving goose intestines like pasta." Still, such offerings generate buzz and "excitement" among staff and clientele.

When asked if game and other different meats and off-cuts are part of their brand, some chefs point to their being integral to today "locavore" focus. Tony Meyers of Serratto where the rabbit dishes "get the most feedback," and which serves a 12 oz. buffalo ribeye steak on weekends, comments, "I really enjoy things that are fresh and local. And: Serratto supports local, sustainable and organic, and we make sure all our proteins fit that bill." Chris Carricker of the Gilt Club says, "Game meats offer more complexity and depth in flavor than chicken or salmon do. In my mind it is also shows that (we are) trying to branch out from the normal run-of-the-mill Oregon fare." At the same time, the cuisine "seems to fit the decadence of the food I am trying to establish at the Gilt Club. I am trying to push the envelope a little at a time and hope the customers are along for the ride."

Many owners and chefs, however, do it because it is simply what they enjoy, and the challenge is fun and stimulating. Carricker says, "It is food I enjoy cooking at home." And again, it can be economical: Gabriel Rucker at Portland's Le Pigeon — where goat is extremely popular — likes to serve "cheaper cuts that chefs love to cook, love to eat, take long, slow cooking processes; enjoyable processes to go through to get to the finished result." How do exotic offerings fit the Le Pigeon brand? "I've never had a 'brand,' never tried. It's all been perpetual motion," moving from a daring foray into lamb tongue, then braised beef, now pork tongue and beef tongue. Rucker announced, as we talked, that he was preparing goat for a dinner option. Prepared how? Roasted all night in the oven with chiles and garlic, then shredded and used in gnocchi.

One of the keys to stimulating customer interest in unusual fare



is front-of-the-house training and buy-in. Bennett of Sybaris notes that “the wait staff must taste the food so that they can describe it to guests who possibly have not had it before.” Executive Chef Michael Theime of Eugene’s Sweetwater’s Restaurant has been serving game for nearly 20 years, and he advises that it “takes a little education with the wait staff because customers have questions, especially if they’re afraid to taste it.” He says that when he first started at the Valley River Inn’s eatery, “nobody was doing game.” But while Bennett of Sybaris says that his Michigan classical training — from an old-school European master — taught him that “quality restaurants offer game, just as they would have a solid wine list,” San Francisco-area native Theime also sees a regional impetus: “I think game is a necessity. In my opinion, working with Northwest ingredients, how can you not have game?” On the other hand, he confides, when he was among the first chefs in Oregon to offer game dishes in the early 1990s, “it was a hard sell,” and he even received some hate mail. Later, with better staff training, followed by customer word-of-mouth “advertising,”

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there followed the expectation that game would always be available, and now venison, for example, is a "staple" there. International travelers and conference attendees at Valley River Inn, says the veteran chef, have come to expect "a taste of the Northwest." That's true, from Europeans, for whom game is usual restaurant fare, to Japanese visitors, used to a fish-based diet, who Theime says are eager to "try venison and other red meat."

In many of today's restaurants, say the chefs, locals also ask for certain cuts and kinds of unusual meats. And sometimes they get educated in the process. "On any given weekend," Serratto's chef Tony Meyers offers a couple of specials with boar, buffalo, foie gras, rabbit, squab, pheasant, quail, "most game birds," venison and lamb. He says that "it is fun to be able to work with such great product all the time, creating something wonderful and unique for someone and having them still talking about it the next day — that's the biggest reward possible." The Gilt Club's Carricker reports that customers are "sometimes surprised that elk tartar is not so gamey but delicious, and that the boar nuggets have more complex flavor than any pork they have ever had." Sybaris' Bennett says that "customers appreciate the effort in (Sybaris) offering the out-of-the-ordinary."

Any advice from these chefs for preparing game? Chef Richard Burr heads up the kitchens at Spirit Mountain Casino in Grande Ronde and serves buffalo, elk and venison for Tribal Feeding Night in their massive buffet — where "these 'indigenous ingredients' are a great fit" — as well as for banquets and specials in their fine

dining restaurant. He cautions that such items have to be "properly prepared," meaning for Chefs Theime and Meyers that game should be cooked medium-rare or even rare, due to its typical leanness. Theime says, "cook it less than you think you should." That goes for game birds as well, and a critical point is that wait staff understands why and be prepared to communicate that to guests. And to balance the expense, try braised buffalo short ribs, ragus, legs and shoulders; and use as much of the product as possible in sauces, reductions and the like. To offset the slight gaminess of elk, Sybaris' Bennett offers this recipe from his kitchen:

*Sybaris Maple-Porter Marinade for Red Meat Game
(Venison, Elk, etc.)*

- 1 Bottle Porter
- 1 C. Maple syrup
- 1 Tbs. Fresh ginger, grated
- 2 Tbs. Cracked black pepper
- 1 Tbs. Balsamic vinegar

The growing popularity of such menu offerings in Oregon restaurants will undoubtedly continue, as it dovetails with national dining trends, predicted in the National Restaurant Association's annual chef survey for 2010. There, the consensus of 1,800 ACF chefs is that 2010 will see sustainability, local sourcing, nutrition, and "farm-branded ingredients," as the "hottest culinary themes." Yet that's not because the state's restaurant are following the herd, but rather naturally developing an evolving, distinctive Oregon cuisine. | JOEL POMERANTZ

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